JESUS THE COMPASSIONATE
JOHN 11:35

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John 11:35, besides being the shortest verse in the Bible, just may be one of the most important. Two words: subject and verb: "Jesus wept". The old stand-by of countless Sunday School Bible memory contests: repeated mostly without thinking about the volumus it really speaks. Later on in the same account we read that "Jesus was deeply moved: the New English Bible translates "he sighed deeply". And together they tell us about something in Jesus that is very significant.

We are a little afraid of the story itself, and well we ought to be. For what do you do with a man like him? What do you do with this power to command dead Lazarus - whose death is punctuated by the author's earthy vignette regarding the aesthetics of opening a four day old grave - what do you do with this power to command him to get up and walk, whereupon he does just that? Do you treat that allegorically and conclude that Jesus' own resurrection is here foretold? Do you treat it symbolically and conclude that it really didn't happen at all,but that Jesus said some particularly significant things about life after death and the author turned it into a story? Do you treat it as myth - a story inserted into the account by the author of the Fourth Gospel to lend credibility to his claim that Jesus was, in fact, God in the flesh? Or do you accept that literally? Do you believe it happened, just like that?

Well, however, you prefer to handle Lazarus's miracious resurrection: whatever meaning it has for you, I would suggest that the fact that Jesus wept is every bit as important as what he did subsequently.

We've been thinking in recent weeks about the ~~fundamental~~ Christian claim that Jesus was God incarnate. Under that general heading we have thought about the humanity of Jesus: Jesus the Teacher. Today, we come to "Jesus the Compassionate", the one Luke introduces to us by way of a Nayareth incident in which Jesus talked about the blind seeing, the lame walking, the poor hearing good news and the captives being released: the one Matthew reports as saying "inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, my brother, you have done it to me". The one John tells us wept for Mary and Martha because their brother was dead: the one who wept because

his friend had died, the one who felt the pain and need of men in his own body, and who was able to communicate to those about him his total empathy with their situation. The one a modern writer describes in these words: "Whatever hurt people or even bothered them was a concern of Jesus. If they were hungry, he saw the practical necessity of feeding them. If they were sick, disabled, or weak, his mercy was extended to heal or strengthen. If they were defeated or discouraged in the race of life, he offered encouragement for a new start." (George L. Cutton ALive Now! Spring 72, P. 44) Today, we think about Jesus the Compassionate.

One of the current debates in the church is whether our business is "saving souls" or feeding, healing, enabling, freeing people. It's not a new debate, really. The concept of a Social Gospel has been around for a long time, and there have always been advocates on both sides. Today there are groups that specialize in one or the other: there are evangelism people who want the church to be concerned with getting everyone into heaven: and there are social action people who want the church to see that everyone gets enough to eat, and proper medical care, and a good education, and an equal opportunity while they are on the earth. Both groups can arm themselves withBiblical proof-tests to defend their position. And I think the whole debate is a theological cop-out. You cannot honestly confront the beautifully compassionate Jesus of the New Testament and turn him into another -wordly savior. You cannot "spiritualize" the Jesus of the New Testament because he was obviously concerned about the bodily condition of people around him. And so I think it's a phony argument: I think you cannot go one way or the other without doing violence to the one who cared deeply about man as a totality - not body or spirit - but the whole man.

Jesus' Jewish theology, you see, didn't distinguish between soul and body. The Jew's wouldn't have known what we were talking about when we refer to the soul of man as if it were something different from our bodies. Even the Hebrew word for "salvation" - really means wholeness, health, total well-being. And so it is wrong to regard Jesus doing two separate things when he proclaimed God's Kingdom on the one hand, and fed a hungry crowd on the other hand - He simply encountered needy people - and met their needs. He felt their pain; he hurt - because they hurt -

regardless of whether it was the pain of hunger or guilt, leprosy or dishonesty, poverty or sin. That is to say, he was compassionate.

Jesus revealed a God whose nature it is to be compassionate. In the Old Testament lesson this morning we heard a God described who is merciful and kind and forgiving. This is a strong Old Testament then that is played against the theme of God's righteousness and judgement and anger and wrath - and sometimes drowned out by it. Jesus revealed a God who is completely compassionate.

In his time, given the Jewish environment, that was still a radical idea, because the going theology was Greek. For the Greeks the most basic concept of God was serenity, detachment from mortal affairs: the word for it is Ataraxia which means inviolable peace. The Gods on Mt. Olympus didn't care about men. that was part of their charm and appeal. They had absolutely nothing to do with humanity. The Stoic philisophers disregarded the traditional Greek gods, but still talked in terms of God's apathela - his "unfeelingness", and taught a way of life that accepted whatever fate handed out without emotional response. The ideal was to be able to endure physical pain - and emotional pain - without feeling a thing.

Jesus revealed a God who could feel and does feel: a God who suffers and laughs: a God who weeps: a God who hurts where his children hurt. For some it was a blasphemous idea. But for others it was a saving idea - this idea that God cares, that God feels something when we suffer, that God even knows what it means to watch a son die.

A black poet, James Weldon Johnson, put the idea in a form that is child-like, and yet profoundly theological

"And God stepped out on space,
And he looked around, and said,
"I'm lonely-
I'll make me a world

Then God walked around
And God looked around

On all that he had made.

He looked at his sun,

And he looked at his moon,

And he looked at his little stars:

He looked on his world

With all its living things,

And God said: "I'm lonely still.

Then God sat down -

On the side of a hill where he could think,

By a deep, wide river he sat down,

With his head in his hands,

God thought and thought

Till he thought; 'I'll make me a man!"

Jesus revealed a God with feelings: a God who even knows what it is we are experiencing when we are lonely. William Barday put it succinctly: "Jesus Christ came to tell men of a God who cares desparately, a God who is involved in the human situation, A God who in the Old Testament phrase, is afflected in all our afflictions, a God who is concerned." (Ethics in a Permissive Society, P. 31)

Jesus was a compassionate man. He revealed a compassionate God. And to know him very well is to have one's conscience stabled and one's compassion awakened.

Perhaps the major contribution of Christianity to the life of the world is at this point. Now Christian history is not always pretty. We, after all, sponsored the Crusades, the Roman Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots at 9:30 on Masterpiece Theater, and then the Protestants and Catholics of North Ireland dispatching each other today on the 11:00 News, punctuates the obvious point that the compassion of Jesus has not always been reflected in the lives of his people. But there is another side to that story. Once the centuries Christianity has been a humanizing and gentling influence. From the eventual abolishment of the arena in Rome, to the establishment of orphanages and hospitals by the Church, to the push for child labor laws in England, to the abolition of capital punishment in our day, the people of Jesus have

been the one consistant source of compassion; the one source where the dignity and sanctity of the individual was worth dying for. Christianity produced a William Booth, who founded the Salvation Army and said: "We saw the need. We saw the people starving, we saw people going about half=naked, people doing serated labour; and we set about bringing a remedy for these things. We were obliged - there was a compulsion. How could one do anything else?"

Booth knew the compassion of Jesus Christ: Booth's own great compassionate spirit is best revealed, however, not in his public speeches, but in a casual comment he once made: namely that he was haunted by the thought of children to whom the word 'kiss' was a meaningless mystery. "(Ibid. P.32)

Many of the harsh and brutal social conditions that awakened William Booth's conscience and compassion are gone today. And yet I believe there is a need today for compassion in our common life as never before. There is a desparate, crying need for a humanizing influence in a time of war by technology: when men sit in planes 30,000 feet in the air, and have no idea whatever who gets killed when the bombs hit. There is a desparate need for basic human compassion in mass, urban society when thousands of sick, elderly people sit in one room hovels without anyone in the world who cares whether they live or die. Someone has to translate Welfare case number 74,630" into Mrs. Brown, who thinks about the way it used to be around the dinner table, and who likes sugar cookies, and whose arthritis hurts every night. Someone has to reduce the body counts to individual men, and boys, and widows, and fatherless children. Someone has to reduce that safe military euphemisn called "Protective reaction strike" into little children who die in infancy, bodies riddled with the fragments of American anti-personel bombs. Someone has to remember that picture of two little boys standing outside a town called My Lai: Brothers, nine and six, the elder sheltering the younger: both of whom were shot to death. Someone has to have the courage to cry - to weep - publically - to have compassion.

To be that person today, is not an easy thing to do. For our culture is a little skeptical of the compassionate man. Compassion just may be weakness. We a start out by teaching little boys not to cry. We teach our children that it's

best to be tough. And we proceed through adulthood trying desparately not to reveal the deeply human feelings in our hearts. Our image of real manhood says "I don't need pity - I don't need anyone's compassion", which quickly becomes "I can't feel compassion". Patton was the prototype: the strong, indestructable man, the totally unfeeling automotion. But there is another kind of man, and when we meet him we are strangely moved and compelled by him: a man characterized in the very popular movie "Billy Jack". The tremendous appeal of Billy Jack is, I believe, in the fact that he is a strong and sufficient man, but also a man who can cry when little Indian Children are degraded and dehumanized.

Albert Schweitzer once said. "There is so much coldness among men because we do not dare to be as cordial as we really are. "And went on to say that we act as men toward other men when we can care and have compassion.

There are other reasons why it is difficult to be a compassionate man today. To show compassion for one's fellow men is to risk being regarded as weak and soft: it is to risk being called a "bleeding heart". But in addition it is difficult because of a certain middle class isolation from any real suffering. There are a lot of hungry, hurting,bleeding people out there - but they aren't visible in the circles most of us frequent. They don't come to P.T.A.: they don't belong to Bridge Clubs and they don't come to Presbyterian Churches. They live off the beaten paths of urban society - and it's quite possible to live in ignorance of their existance.

At the opposite end of the spectrum television brings so much suffering into our living rooms, in living color, that I think we protect ourselves by simply not allowing it to register. I know it happens to me. We were getting ready to go out to dinner one evening and happened to see the execution of several men in Pakistan - by bayonet - in front of a cheering crowd, and I experienced a rather intense desire to shut it out: to not feel anything at all.

Finally, I believe we all salve our consciences with a little sentiment - which is substantially different from compassion. We allow ourselves to observe a little suffering: we allow just a little conern. But it isn't deep: it doesn't really hurt. We give a little more to the United Fund and the pain stops. Tolstoi told the story

of elegant Russian ladies who would cry at the theater, without giving a thought to their shivering coachman waiting outside in the cold. There is a little of that in all of us.

Jesus was a compassionate man who could cry publically at the death of a friend. He showed us a God of compassion. And he calls us,as part of our discipleship to become his compassionate people. The psychiatrist Rollo May says that learning to care - to feel - to have compassion - is our most urgent problem. To follow Jesus Christ is to deal with that - to learn how to feel for others - to learn to hurt when others hurt - to be Christians to the point of weeping publically for the suffering of other men.

It is to learn to have compassion for each other. One writer put it this way: it is possible to experience, through each other, the loving God who became incarnate in the Compassionate Christ. (Lela M. Hendrix Alive Now! P. 38)

And that sentiment is expressed in a very old and beloved hymn, written in 1832. "We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear, and often for each other flows, The Sympathizing tear."

When we learn that - when we can feel for each other - and weep for each other - and rejoice for each other, we become men as God created us to be. And we usher in a little bit of his Kingdom on Earth. AMEN

Father, help us to feel the pain of others. As we follow our Lord to his cross, help us to see again his great compassion for us and for all men. AMEN